

Reflections on a night at a zoning board hearing

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By Jerry Leisner

Picture if you would, the following scenario. You've come to a meeting where the majority of the people neither like you nor feel you have a right to be there. An attorney, who probably makes more in a year than you make in five, refers to you as a paid emissary. He's paid to be here. You're just completing a 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. day and you're paid for eight hours.

You hear the man to your left refer to you and your staff, who also came without pay, as pot lickens. A nice-seeming man behind you, who reminds you of your Uncle Jim, refers to you as a bunch of trouble makers.

You keep thinking of mentally retarded persons who are happily living in the community and a number of people who would love to live in a real house (and who would do real well) but who the people in the room don't want to move in (even though they don't know any one of them).

You think of the person being kept out for reasons A through Z so you deal with those issues so they know that you've adequately addressed those issues.

You wish you could take some of the persons who are still concerned to a group home to meet some of the mentally retarded citizens living there as very congenial good neighbors, but you wouldn't want to turn a group *home* into a showcase for gawkers.

You say what you need to and assure the people there that it's a good program. Then



they vote that what you've been saying is nonsense and tell you that they're against persons who aren't as smart as them living in town.

You leave knowing that little Kimmy, who's such a nice young girl, and that old Bob, who works so hard to help clean the building he lives in, still won't have a real home to live in where they can learn the real warm meaning of family love. They'll continue to live in a large impersonal institution because this community is getting a bunch of tough people together to keep anyone frailer than themselves out.

You know that, legally, the house and mentally retarded citizens have a right to be there and you know, clinically (as a psychologist who has worked in community programs and institutional programs), it's better for them but sometimes you wonder, what's the use?

Then you go back by the institution and see Kimmy and Bob (and many other persons a lot like them) and how normal they*are. Then you know how right it is for them to live in a house and you start over again if you meet resistance.

You feel bad that what seem to be good people can be so cruel to people they don't even know, but you go on because you know it's right. **If** you could stop the world and spend enough time with each individual to get beyond misconceptions and down to the truth of the matter you would, but the world doesn't stop for any of us.

There has to be a point where parochialism is overcome by the constitutional protections for *every* citizen, including women, blacks, Jews, the Irish, plumbers, carpenters, Jaycees, people with polio, with psoriasis, and citizens who happen to, incidentally, be mentally retarded.